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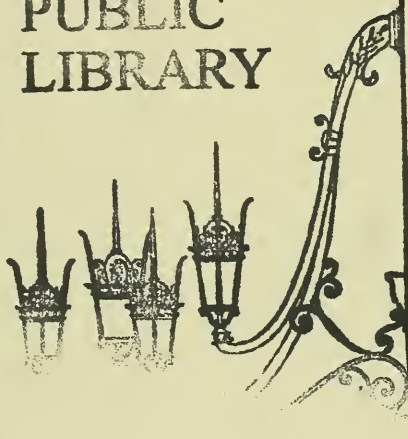
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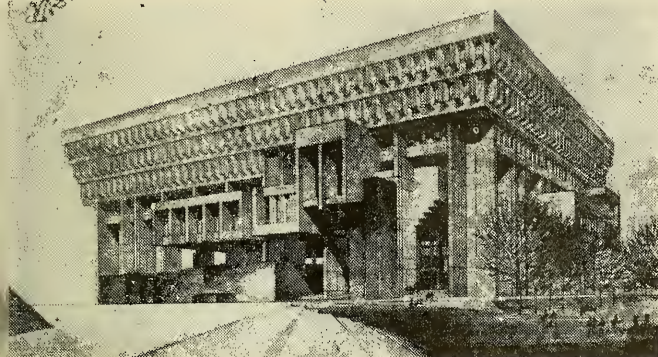
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Boston's New City Hall

It Has Vigor

By WOLF VON ECKARDT

Boston gambled and, to blurt right out with it, won!

Boston's new City Hall, though still a year from completion, already stands audaciously revealed as a great work of architecture—most likely, along with Eero Saarinen's Dulles Airport terminal near Washington, the greatest on the American scene in a decade or two.

This, of course, is a risky statement to make in public print. But the risk is infinitesimal compared to that taken by Boston's city fathers when they ventured to entrust the design of their new City Hall to a national competition and stuck with its baffling result even when it turned out that no one had ever heard of the winners.

Not since 1909, when an open competition was held for San Francisco's City Hall, have the politicians of this country yielded the design of a major public building to a jury of experts.

Congress, in a fit of absent-mindedness, attempted this for the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, but hastily closed its mind when it saw the result. In the second go-around the FDR Memorial Commission reverted to the safe and usual method of selecting a distinguished architect on the basis of the popularity of his previous work.

The general result of this method is that we have more and more distinguished architects and less and less distinguished architecture.

The success of the Boston competition is in large measure due to the fact that the city knew what it wanted. It had a firm and excellent plan for the site of the new City Hall prepared by I. M. Pei.

Most cities are too timid to make the best of urban renewal and adjust the street pattern to new needs and contexts. Pei, encouraged by Boston's urban renewer, Edward J. Logue, seized the opportunity to give the city a strong new heart that can not only successfully compete with the misconceived Prudential Center but also serve as a fulcrum for the renewal of all of downtown.

Pei reduced 22 existing streets to six and created a marvelous, gently sloping plaza, comparable in size to St. Peter's Square in Rome and framed by carefully scaled and proportioned buildings.

In contrast to St. Peter's Square, there is a studied but, it seems to me, most effective informality about the plaza that is more medieval than renaissance, more humanly appealing than institutionally impressive.

The City Hall is the focus, the "keystone" of this plaza. It doesn't depend on size to command central attention.

To make sure that the competition would yield just that—and not another, more gimmicky office building merely labeled "city hall"—Pei carefully prescribed its dimensions (up to 130 feet high and some 275 feet square). To make sure that the competition winner would be accepted not

only by the jury of outstanding architects (William Wurster, Ralph Rapson, Walter Netsch and Pietro Belluschi) but also by the community, three leading businessmen were added to it. And to make sure the winning design would actually be executed, the construction funds were appropriated in advance.

The miracle happened. The scheme worked. The eight semifinalists who emerged from the 256 entries, some of them by well-known architects, were all relatively young and as yet obscure. The ultimate winners, Gerhard M. Kallmann, Noel Michael McKinnell and Edward F. Knowles, were design critics at Columbia University at the time. Although all three had worked in various architectural offices, none had done any building under his own name.

But the real miracle is that meshed in the chaos of construction work, it is clear that the Kallmann - McKinnell - Knowles City Hall provides precisely what was needed to make Boston's government center the greatest triumph of urban design since New York's Rockefeller Center was built in the 1930's.

In the first place, its designers understood what a plaza in the city is all about. It is not a park, of which Boston has plenty. Greenery, so often artificially commended to hide mistakes of design, will be confined to a grove of hefty trees in one corner.

This will be a hard, tough place, as hard and tough as the city itself, all paved in red brick. Life in a plaza, McKinnell said, does not occur in the center but around the edges where people cluster and look toward the center. The plaza is essentially a place of passage, of congregation and of celebration.

What is more, the plaza, like a tide from everywhere at once, converges on City Hall. In fact, it extends right into the building, whose lower-level public areas are lined and paved of the same red brick to emphasize this continuity.

What is a City Hall? It is, the designers decided, essentially three things. First, a place to conduct the essential public business—the counters and offices where the citizens get their various licenses, pay and argue about their assessments and deal with the city in numerous other ways.

No citizens in recent times ever had as easy and direct access to these departments as Bostonians will have when their new City Hall is

completed. Like stores they are strung along wide interior streets and ramps on the lower levels of the building and have their separate entrance. There won't be any confusing maze of long corridors and endless rows of filing cabinets, because the second function of a City Hall, its administrative offices, are out of the way on the top level of the building.

Kallmann, McKinnell and Knowles, instead, have given pre-eminence to the third and most important function of a city hall: the ceremonials of government as conducted in the council chamber and the mayor's offices, with the municipal library added to give the proceedings a little wisdom and memory.

They articulated, in fact they dramatized, these ceremonial rooms and placed them on a level between the public areas and the office warrens, almost like separate buildings stuck into the structure and clearly discernible from the outside.

On the inside, they frame an interior hall nine stories high—a gathering place, all open and public with magnificent stairs, balconies and terraces, a great agora, a place that proclaims the majesty of government by the people.

It does so because the architects have related and integrated the three functions of a city hall into one unified structure without a "premeditated image." Their concern was not to impress with an authoritarian monument but by making each part of the building work to best advantage and by clearly articulating it, to express, as Kallmann put it, "the vigor of government."

It is, he says, no accident that the building was inspired at the time when its designers were inspired by the presidency of John F. Kennedy who, like this new City Hall, pronounced the word "vigor" with that peculiar Boston accent.

There is more that relates this building to Boston. The window in the mayor's office very deliberately and symbolically frames Faneuil Hall, and from the council chambers you have a magnificent view over the old city with the Old State House on Court st. as a focal point.

Already, though its roof is not quite complete and this calm structure is still in this building is what its designers most wanted it to be and what our cities need most. In Kallmann's words: "A confirmation of identity and existence to counter the modern fear of nothingness."

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